

CHRISTMAS EVE AT PILOT BUTTE

By Courtney Ryley Cooper

IT WAS cold in the tumbled, box-strewn freightroom of the rambling station at Rawlins, cold and dark, except for the faint, reflected rays of a street lamp outside, and the weak spray of light spattered from the dusty, old lantern in the hand of the freight agent as he made his trip of inspection before locking up for the night.

Perfunctorily he inspected the shipments that awaited loading in the morning—case after case of shoes, of shirts and overalls from the workrooms of the state prison just outside town, the work of men who day by day thus expiated their rebellion against the law.

It was an old story to the freight agent, this evening inspection before locking up. He raised the lantern high above his head, peered about in a squinting effort to pierce the heavier shadows at the far end of the room, then, whistling out of tune, turned his back upon the piles of boxes in the freightroom and slammed the door. With the sound, another man, eyes projecting with pain, muscles knotted, face contorted, breathed evenly again for the first time in a long, horrible moment.

He had held his breath since the first clattering sound of the agent's approach; if the lantern had revealed so much as the vapor of his breath in that frigid, crackling room—

But he had won. A long wait, while the sound of steps sounded faintly from the waiting room beyond. Then the jingling of keys, the clack of a heavy lock and silence. Silence which lasted, minutes after minutes, broken only by the slow pounding of a heart, like a triphammer, to the only ears that could hear.

Then a new sound broke the stillness; it came from the biggest of the packing cases. Crackling, a board broke from the nails which bound it. Again, for a third time, a long, splintering crash, and then as the boards flew back, a great figure rose from the box, his tall, heavy-shouldered form casting a monstrous shadow on the back wall as he stood on instant listening. A leap and he had emerged completely from his hiding place; another and he was peering out the smoke-smear window. Only the swirling snow, the awing shadow of the arc above—

he saw nothing more, and a thin smile bent his boyish lips. His little, winy hands, still brown, opened and closed nervously. The bright, sharp eyes, catching the gleam of the street light, seemed to radiate it, like freshly cleaned jewels. Tense he stood, breathing deep at the cold, refreshing air, only to shake himself suddenly into realization of his freedom and, with swift, noiseless steps, strode toward the door.

BEYOND the office was dark, but instinct guided him to the hat-rack and the agent's work-cap which hung there—then to the drawer of the bill desk. He fumbled, then clutched tight at a black-boxed forty-five six-gun and a box of cartridges. Again he bent the boyish lips. He thrust the gun and cartridges into a pocket of his prison suit and reached for the lock of the nearest window. Only the snow and the screaming wind of the blizzard greeted him when, cautious and alert, he clambered out into the night and closed the window behind him.

He sought the side streets and alleys with the fevered desire that only a fugitive can know. At a bright corner he stood huddled in the shadows for a long time summoning the courage to cross the street. The sound of the prison had not sounded. Thus long no one knew, except the comrades who had nailed him into the box, and they would never tell. He strode out into the light of the thoroughfare, the splattered snow on his prison suit neutralizing its telltale gray, the freight agent's cap pulled low over his eyes.

His long, gangling, half-swaying stride was that of a man off the range; the swing of his shoulders and arms was that of one accustomed to the wide stretches of Wyoming's vast expanses; passers-by saw nothing more in him than a young, strong, good-looking cowpuncher in town for a night of movies; that was all. He even brushed the sleeve of a policeman as he passed him on a corner. The officer nodded patronizingly:

"Tough night, ain't it?"

"Shore is," was the drawing answer; and the man who an hour before had been convict No. 43726 passed on.

Two blocks farther along he came to a doorway, leading, by means of a worn, wooden staircase, to lodgings above. He turned in swiftly and with stealthy steps ascended. A light shone through the grimy transom above the door. The man squared his shoulders, stood hesitant a moment as if to summon something more than physical courage—then knocked.

"Who's there?" It was a feminine voice, sharp, somewhat careful. "Only an old man," he replied, and the door opened. Steps approached beyond the knock and the lock clicked. A wave of light swept over him, and with it came the gasp of a frightened woman.

"Bart! Bart, what are you—"

"Better not talk so loud," he drawled softly. "That ain't a good name to be shouting around now. Nobody knows yet that I'm out."

He brushed past her into the room, closing the door behind him, then, half in defiance, half in appraisal, gazed at the woman who stared at him in dumb surprise.

She was small and dark, with alluring eyes and a face at once babyish and sophisticated, quite the type of child-woman whose lot in life would seem to be solely the molding of a man to her own desires—with little hands that could caress and soothe and lips that could tempt and cajole.

Weakly she leaned against the table for a second and put forth a tiny hand.

"Bart, you frightened me so! How did you get out?"

"How'd I get out? Oh, I don't make much difference. Here I am."

"But, why—"

"It's just about a week till Christmas. I got to turn in! It over in my mind that that maybe you might want me for a Christmas present."

"Of course! Old Bart!" She straightened then, and came toward him, arms outstretched, lips pursed. But he made no move. Suddenly she pointed.

"Let's wait," he drawled. "I'll taste sweeter after while. Listen!"

FROM far away sounded the wail of the prison siren carrying across the storm the news that one number was missing on the night check, that one steel-barred cell stood empty, that walls and locks and tempered bolts had failed and that a gray-clad fugitive was somewhere fighting to safety. For a long moment it screamed and roared while they stood poised and listening. Voices rose from the street beneath; five times the club of the policeman clattered against a clanging electric light pole in furtherance of the warning. Some one called a name. The woman looked up wide-eyed.

"They know! They're calling your name."

"Yeh!" The cold smile had not left his lips. "That's what comes of having a reputation. But then, we don't care, do we? I never paid no attention to anything—I jest thought about how much you loved me and how I was doing it all for you—and I knew you'd never forget."

"Of course not, Bart!" The baby hands were touching his shoulders, creeping upward toward his neck.

He whirled, almost savagely, his head bent toward the street.

"What's that?"

"Some one's coming—it sounds like a mob—so much yelling!" She clutched him frenziedly, then sighed, as if with relief. "No, it's only the boys with the papers. They must have gotten out an extra."

"Go! Go get one."

"But—"

"I'm safer here than anywhere else. Hurry and get a paper. I want to see how much they know."

A moment of indecision; then the woman reached hastily for her cloak and left the room. The fugitive waited only for the sound of her steps on the stairs, and with a leap he crossed the room to where a few scattered letters lay on an untidy writing desk. A glance—a sneer, joy-cold, malignant.

"His writing!"

The convict's eyes shot toward the beginning of the missive as he pulled it forth and the pupils contracted.

"My darling! eh! Fine way for a brother to write to a sister." Then to the end of the letter and the words:

"Loads of love and kisses, your loving husband, Walter." It was enough. He jammed the letter deep into his pocket and crossed to the shaded window, there gently to draw back the curtain and peer down upon the white thoroughfare beneath. The woman was crossing the street. A shouting newsboy flaunted a paper before her, but she shook her head; straight on she went, and through the frost-whitened doors of the corner drug store.

"The telephone!" He said it naturally, calmly, almost as though he had expected it. And five minutes later the opening of the door found him lounging easily in the center of the room, where she had left him.

"Well!" He shot the question quickly. "What's the reward?"

"A thousand—"

"Then she colored and rattled the sheet brought hastily on the return trip. 'Why, it—it doesn't say. It just tells—'

"Bart Carson, Train Robber, Escapes Prison." He had cocked his head and was reading the headlines. Then, still with that slow smile on his lips, he improvised: "Man who stole a Overland train robberies to save sweetheart's trapped brother, wakes up at last. Doesn't care to serve prison sentence for another woman's husband—"

"Bart, what on earth do you mean?"

A different man was looking down at her now, all the boyishness gone, the once trustful eyes narrow and vicious, the mouth grim and hard.

"Just what I'm saying! I aint in the habit of going to prison for lying women's husbands."

His hand came down, and he clutched a jagged sentence of pent-up hatred at the throat: "Don't answer me! It wouldn't be nothing but lies!"

I know—I've got one of his letters in my pocket. I read it while you were over there, telephoning for the sheriff. So I went to the pen to save the other brother. Did I? And he signs himself 'your loving husband.' A voice then lips closed—they don't get no where with me! I found it all out before I'd been in the pen a week—old Dad Cushman, who went up the range day I did, told me. He knew. He ought to. He'd worked with you both! Get that! He laughed at me for the sucker I'd made of myself; then he went to the warden and tried to tell him the truth.

"But it didn't do no good. So we waited for our chance—there aint any prison that can hold a man when there's others helpin' him. They smuggled me out tonight in a case of shirts and—I'm different now. I aint that soft-eyed cowpuncher any more, that come in off the range."

"I was willin' to go to the pen for a thing I'd never done, willin' to take my chances for somebody that I thought I was savin' from disgrace and who'd be workin' and pleadin' for a pardon for me—and well—"

HE straightened suddenly, and his arms dropped limp a second before they extended toward the door.

"No! No! I've ridden range; I've bulldozed steers; I've rode the worst sunfishers that the buck could corral, and I aint afraid of beast, man or devil. I've got a name now! And I'm going to live up to it! If I go back, I'll be for something worse while! Remember that! Something worse! Good-bye."

Suddenly galvanized into spasmodic action, she sprang toward him as he reached the door, her baby hands clinging to him, her lips pleading.

"Please, Bart!" she begged. "You haven't heard everything. You've just—"

"Haven't I? It was the drawl again. 'I'm thinkin' different. Dad Cushman told me ever'thing I need to know. 'Why'—and a break came into his voice—he aint even your own husband, Lou. You took him away from another woman—a woman who's got to look day after day at her little kid and know that his blood's in 'er, that—"

"It's a lie!" Her voice was a snarl. The fire came back into Bart Carson's eyes.

"A lie, is it? I can lead you to her place—the old busted-down 'Pilot Butte' ranch, in the west part of the 'Pilot Butte' country. Don't tell me it's a lie! I can tell you what she looks



THE WOMAN HAD DRAWN A SMALL REVOLVER FROM HER HANDBAG.

like—I've seen her. Only—only I never knew who she was until Dad Cushman told me. And I'll believe Dad Cushman—if he is a forger. He took his own medicine; he went up for his own boys. He didn't hide his hand no woman's skirts to keep out of it."

When the train stopped at Creston he clambered down and crept back to the caboose, deserted now as the conductor at the station platform forward superintended the unloading of local freight. He entered the car boldly. Paper, envelopes, pencil and stamps were on the little makeshift desk. There, with thoughtful prelude, he began the writing of a letter to a person who to him represented the world—the editor of the Rawlins Bugle.

dear sir, I am writing you this so you can tell the people that I am not as bad as I am painted. I escaped from the Pen because I found out I had been done wrong and I don't intend to stand for it. I am accused of robbing trains. Well after I have robbed a few trains you will see that my methods are different from the fellow that I went up to the Pen for. I am out now and I am going to find him and if the officials want punish him I will. I tell the R. R. people to put on as many guards as they want to, I don't care. I'll get past them and after I have got the money to hunt down this other man and bring him to justice then I will stop robbing trains. Yours very truly,

BART CARSON.

Ahead (in answer to the "highball") the sharp whistle of the engine sounded. Quickly Carson addressed the envelope, stamped it, then dropped from the caboose as the conductor made his way to the little station mail box and deposited the letter, to be carried on to Rawlins by the next forty-one express. And the next night—

A CRASH sounded in the vestibule of the cross-country limited as it pulled slowly out of Medicine Bow. Glass splintered, a door swung open. Guards, on duty since the train had left Cheyenne, leaped from their seats. It was to no purpose, for they were already covered by a tall, unmasked figure in prison gray that stood in the doorway of the Pullman.

"Lay down them six-guns," he ordered. "I ain't here to hurt nobody. I just want money. I'm Bart Carson."

The name was enough. Staring headlines had carried the news of a train robber's escape all over the Rocky mountain region. The telegraph had clicked his letter broadcast almost the moment it reached Rawlins. Gasping passengers rose from their seats, hands above their heads. Women screamed. The man who once had been a cowpuncher bowed toward them with the old gallantry of the plains.

"I don't hurt women and kids," he assured them, and smiled as he said it. "And I don't take nothing from 'em. But as for you men—"

His face went suddenly grim, and the large revolver spat suddenly toward the roof of the car. "I'm out to sort 'em out a little Christmas present for myself. Dig!"

White-faced, the male passengers of the coach lined up before him presented a study in contrasts. Some strove to smile; some were frankly panicky; others cried—as the hysterical women crouched in the seats were crying. One alone was calm—the man who held the revolver, whose eyes had lost their set, staring expression to give way to the old boy-

ishness of the plains, the old recklessness and love of danger.

He was taking no risks; he could only be recaptured for a prison escape, already accomplished.

The physical hazard did not even enter his mind—he had faced death many times before; for instance, during bad moments with a milling herd at round-up. This was more like some sort of game. One by one he corralled the conductor, the porter and the brakeman as they entered the car, so that they might not pass the word along to the rest of the train.

Then he ordered the frightened passengers—and the guards—to pass before him, dropping their contributions into his cap as they came. For each of them he had some joking remark. To one who sobbed he returned a gold watch, a professed gift from a dead mother. To another a tiny rattle, a baby had worn it. To a crying child he tossed a silver dollar with his one free hand and made the chuckling announcement that he'd bounce her on his knee if he wasn't so busy. Then suddenly scooping the money into a pocket, he replaced his cap, pulled hard at the air signal, and the brakes set fired a second shot through the roof of the car to hold the crowd and made for the vestibule.

A well traveled road lay not fifty feet away where he made the leap from the coach, and he ran toward it, his footprints showing plainly in the clean snow. There, however, the possibility of tell-tale tracks eliminated in the hard-pressed path of automobiles, he whirled swiftly, ducked into the shadows, then dived for the trusty rods beneath the very car.

Just left. Sprung upon the ice-coated tracks, he watched the feet of the crowd as they milled about the car, followed his tracks to the road, to lose them there.

The conductor and brakeman were attaching a telegraph key to the main trunk line by means of a "short" elevated to the singing wires above on a bamboo pole, carried for the emergency of wreck or fire. Soon the key began to click. Bart Carson knew that the news of his first real train robbery was being sent to Rawlins and thence to the world.

Presently he heard: "Get those passengers back into the cars." It was the conductor who issued the command to the brakeman. "All they're doing is stamping out the trail. Rawlins is sending a posse and horses on a special train. We'll wait for 'em at Barbee Junction."

The train rolled on through three frigid miles to Barbee, carrying beneath a forward coat a man who shivered in the icy wind that swept the tracks. Hours passed, it seemed before the special arrived. Hurrying railroad agents dragged their clattering horses down the runways and sped back to the scene of the robbery. The Pacific limited thereupon resumed its journey across the continent, leaving behind at the little deserted station a half-frozen man who crept to a toolhouse and huddled there in comparative warmth.

Presently he crept forth and skirting the deserted "special" on the siding, climbed the steps of the caboose.

Like a curious boy, he entered the car which had brought a posse—to capture him. Clothing was scattered about; a rifle or two had been left in the rack. On a table lay a pile of sandwiches and cans of coffee. Swiftly he slipped into coat, trousers, heavy shirt and sweater from among the variegated clothes, stuffed sandwiches into the pockets and then, as he found a stub of a pencil, wrote hurriedly on a bit of wrapping paper:

dear Sheriff, never go so far away to look for me. I'm only going to rob

a few more trains, so you better hurry. look for me tomorrow night.

BART CARSON.

BRAVADO, perhaps! But in the mind of the desperado was another, a different impulse. He had confessed to a crime that he had not committed when detectives were nearing the trail of the right man. He had been tricked—but when he had told his story they would not believe him. There was at least one way, to him, that he could prove it, and this was the way. Walter Walker, whom he had saved from prison, had robbed express cars and mail coaches in the ordinary manner and striven his best to hide his identity. They must at least admit that Bart Carson's method was different.

When the early morning train for Salt Lake stopped for water just before dawn a tall man applied to a sleepy porter for a berth in the tourist sleeper, and got it. But when that porter gave the first breakfast call the berth was empty. And that night another train was robbed.

And the night following! In vain posse sought to trail the tracks in the snow, but in some way they were always defeated, tricked into ludicrous mistakes. For working against them was a man who had spent his life in the open, who knew the hills and scraggly country of that portion of Wyoming as a teacher knows his text-books. Out into the open country he led them, hot upon the scent, only to double like a jackrabbit almost within their range of vision. Another train would be robbed that night!

The reward climbed from a thousand to two, then to five, to seven, really to ten. The guards were doubled, but a guard is only a human being with a gun, and the advantage depends upon the man who first gets the drop. Bart Carson always held the winning cards of surprise. Once they loaded the vestibules with armed men waiting for him. And while they waited he stepped from a closet of the Pullman where he had secreted himself at a division point and held up the one car without the guards being the wiser.

The immediate task completed, he backed to the door, stood at one side, shouted and shot. As the guards ran in he ran out. That was all.

It was four days later that Bart Carson crouched in the shadow of the water-tank at Landslide for what was to be his final "round-up." He had counted his proceeds. A few hundred dollars more would put him past the three thousand mark he had set. With that sum in his possession he could go where he chose, could take the trail and hold it until he had gained the thing he sought. After that—

The glare of a headlight interrupted his speculation. He flattened himself against the heavy timbers, fastening as he did so the last buttons of a dirty "jumper" suit that he had pilfered from a switch shanty, together with an equally grimy railroad's cap and a lantern. His face was smeared with engine grease. The cap visor was low over his eyes. As the locomotive took on its supply of water he came forth, his lantern lighted, and chatted with the engineer. Then down along the train he went, his lighted "hayburner" over his arm, and as the porter swung aboard at the "highball" he followed, to pass the guards, and to stride slowly through the Pullman as the train gathered speed.

There was one coach that he had left untouched on every train—the observation car at the rear. Instinctively he knew that the guards would not be watching for him there to-

night. Quietly he opened the door, putting on the snap lock as he closed it, walked through without even glancing at the passengers and out upon the rear platform. One man with a rifle was there, but he paid no attention to the greasy "railroader" as the latter set his lantern on the floor. A blow on the wrist! The rifle flew over the brass rail of the observation car, and a gasping guard stared into the eyes of a six-gun and into Bart Carson's grinning countenance.

"Into the coach, boy, and tell 'em I'm coming!"

The door opened. The usual shot cut through the room. A trembling, fear-dumb crowd obeyed his orders. Bart Carson laughed with a joy he had not felt before. It was his last hold-up!

"Christmas is comin'," he mocked as his revolver waved the passengers from their chairs. "Only a few more and I'm outta here."

The gun suddenly trembled and sagged in his grasp. His grin faded. His eyes became set and a green pallor crept upward under the natural brownness of his skin.

"You, eh?" The snarl was almost beastlike. Forgetting for the instant all others in the car, he stared down at a small, dark-haired woman, clothed in black, whose eyes were red from weeping. But Carson, apparently, did not observe that—she only knew that it was she—she who had kissed him—and died. The lines of his face deepened into hard, black gutters. The eyelids twitched, the corners of the lips grooved into straight lines.

"Goin' to him, eh? Trying to beat me? You won't do it! I'll get there—I've got his address; it's on that letter. And if he's gone I'll trace him—I'll—"

He stepped backward suddenly, one hand extended. His gun hand dropped to his side.

"Don't," he pleaded as he backed toward the door. "I—I can't fight a woman!"

But the plea was in vain. The woman had drawn a small revolver from her handbag and covered him. The hammer clicked upon a dead shell! Bart Carson turned his eyes, dull now, and beaten, upon the others in the car.

"I can't fight a woman," he gasped. "I can't—"

There was a flash and a biting sting cut through Bart Carson's extended hand. He stared at it. A blue spot—then blood! Blood—and outside clean, white snow!

THE bandit sprang straight forward and the weapon was knocked from the grasp of the woman and sent crashing through a window. Thereupon he whirled, oblivious of the suddenly brave crowd, seized a newspaper from a lounging chair as he ran, and, wrapping it about the bleeding hand, crashed out upon the rear platform.

A vaulting leap which carried him high above the platform rail, a catapulting journey through the air, and he landed in a snowdrift. The lights of the train far down the track indicated that no one as yet had thought to pull the signal cord.

Bart Carson wrapped the cold paper tighter about his wounded hand, plunged to his feet, and, fighting his way out of the drift, scrambled for the scraggly underbrush beyond. Farther on he came to a stream to swift even for the grip of zero weather, where, hardening his nerves against the shock to come, he splashed into the icy current in which there would be left no trail.

A mile, and gasping with the clutch of the cold, he dragged his numbed legs toward the bank, there to stamp his feet and kick them against a scrubby tree in an effort to restore circulation. A dull aching had begun to creep from his injured hand upward toward his elbow, for the bullet still lay embedded in the flesh. There was no blood now, for the flesh had long since frozen against the wound, sealing it. Doggedly he struck out toward the shadowy hills and black ravines of the far-away country of Pilot Butte, lonely, unrequented, haunted by death in a hundred forms, but to Bart Carson a haven of shelter in this time of storm.

He was safe for a space, he knew—safe from humanity. The wind had risen, bringing with it the first flakes of another snowfall. It would be hours before the posse train could reach the spot into which he had plunged from the observation platform. Hours more must follow in useless reconnoitering. And by that time his trail, even from the creek where he had emerged, would be lost in the thickening snow.

This was his country. He knew every foot of it, every gully. Times without number he had ridden it in just such weather as this in search of a lost bunch of horse, blinded and driven from home, feeding area blizzard. Two miles over the hill, just before the country became a mass of drift-filled gulleys, he knew he would find the first of a series of cattlemen's caches, a small, low-set log cabin, with dry fuel beside the square, sheet-metal camp stove, heavy, coarse clothing and big leather boots awaiting the cowpuncher who might be lost and shelter. Bart Carson took the trail instinctively, his frozen clothing scraping against his body, his numbed feet clumping heavily through the snow, his injured hand, still wrapped in the newspaper, pressed close against his breast, the other hand pressing it firmly in place. For the ache was growing more insupportable now, and the numbness of his wrist told of a constantly increasing swelling. Now and then he stopped to shake himself, like some harassed animal—then on again.

A mile—two. He stumbled into the cabin, and with his free hand tore loose the facings from his shoes. For a while he stamped about against the temptation of a fire and the resulting illumination. But cold and suffering won, he reached upward to where experience gave him to know he would find matches swinging from a line against the marauding pack rats. Presently he crouched and with eager eyes watched the blaze gather life and strength.

WARMTH! It was worth all the danger that the light of the fire might cause. Comfort! He had not known it for days. Sleep! He groaned as in turning he struck his

injured hand against a chain. That bullet must come out! The throbbing had crept almost to his shoulder now. He filled a pan with snow and set it on the stove. Then, bending close to the blaze, he thawed the newspaper from his wound and began his agonizing task.

It was in vain. Only the probe of a surgeon could withdraw that bullet from its resting place; only a surgeon's skill and antiseptic could stay the infection that he knew had already set in. Slowly he laved the wound, taking painful comfort in the touch of the hot water. Then, with a strip of cloth torn from his shirt, he bandaged his hand and turned to the warmth of a change of clothing and the old sheepskin jacket hanging on a hook near the bunk.

He was ready for food now, and he devoured it eagerly—the canned provisions left there in the autumn for the lost men of winter. Then he prepared to go, to travel onward through the night in his circular trip back to the railroad.

Carefully he hid the clothing he had discarded. He bent to cast the blood-stained paper on the flames. As he opened the stove door the freight gleamed on his tired, pain-lined face. He raised the paper—his jaw dropped and he leapt there staring at the sheet. A name in the headline, a short dispatch from San Francisco; that was all, but it turned the world back for Bart Carson. Cheated!

That was why she had been on that eastbound train! That was why her eyes were red from weeping, why the courage had sprung to life! Within her, why she had shot him! Cheated! He read the dispatch tonelessly:

"SAN FRANCISCO, December 23.—Walter A. Walker, thirty-seven, formerly of Rawlins, Wyo., was struck and instantly killed by an automobile here today while crossing a street. Failure to hear the horn of the motorist was responsible for the accident."

And beneath it was the "office note":

"Walker was the husband of Mrs. Lou Walker, who achieved much notoriety several months ago by inducing Bart Carson, the train robber, who now is terrorizing Wyoming railroads, to confess. On the night of his escape from the penitentiary Mrs. Walker was almost successful in effecting his recapture, but Carson made his get-away just as the sheriff arrived. She prepared to leave for San Francisco immediately upon receipt of the telegram announcing her husband's death."

Cheated! Tricked again—beaten, harried, outwitted! Slowly, Bart Carson stuffed the paper into the fire and watched it burn, watched it until it had become only a black, crinkled mass amid the embers. Then, heavily, wearily, he rose and stalked from the cabin back into the night.

The snow had ceased falling. The sky had cleared, and the stars were shining through the branches of the few pines about the little shack. Dully Bart Carson wondered what they resembled, then after a long time he realized. "Candles," he muttered, "on a Christmas tree! Well—I've got my present!"

And he stood for a long moment staring at the night, the vacant gaze of a beaten man. He had stoken for a single purpose, that he might gain the money with which to track an enemy. In the light of what he had read, the romance of his quest had faded. The future held nothing now; he was only a lonely, broken, cheated cowpuncher, racked with pain, gaped out into a world of tangled, snow-laden pines and underbrush, mottled hills, drift-filled ravines—and a spot where the cabin had once stood.

There was no need for conjecture. The smoke, the faint lights of a fire, visible for miles, had done their work. A moment the convict stood undecided. Then, a flash of the old recklessness flooding over him, he turned and re-entered the cabin. An hour later a sheriff left his horse a hundred feet away and creeping soundlessly to the little snow-banked window, peering within. On the bunk he descried the outline of a human form. It was enough. He went to the door and opened it carefully, only to halt.

"That you, Price?"

THE tone was sleepy and petulant. The sheriff hesitated. That was not his name—and he had never heard Bart Carson's voice. Perhaps—a mistake—

"No!" He blurted it. "It's Sheriff Henry. Who are you?"

"Quit yer kiddin', Price. I ain't feelin' set for it. Gimme a drink, will you?"

The sheriff moved closer to the bunk. For a second his gun hand dropped. A cry! A thudding kick as a heavily-booted foot shot forth. The gun fell to the floor. On the bunk the sheriff doubled from the blow in his stomach. A second more and he was prostrate, Bart Carson standing over him with the six-gun, calmly regarding him in the dying light of the fire. A grin came to the cowpuncher's pale lips as his gaze caught the glint of handcuffs protruding from a pocket. He forced his bandaged hand slowly forward, and, hooking the manacles with a crooked finger, dangled them appraisingly